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Marin Voice

Creating a new model of care for older adults in Marin

By Joe O'Hehir

By 2030, it is estimated that more than one in every three Marin residents will be 65 or older. And, the fastest growing sector of the population will be over the age of 85. Meeting the needs of this growing demographic will require a variety of improvements in housing, health care, nutrition and transportation, as well as new models for providing vital services such as social connection, resource referrals, and engagement.

There is no debate about the desperate shortage of affordable housing and other services for older adults in Marin, and as the aging population continues to grow, these challenges will only become more pronounced. It is time for a community-based solution to this growing community crisis.

Whistlestop's proposed solution is the new Healthy Aging Campus, a modern health hub for Marin's older adults that will support the social and medical needs of older adults and provide afford-

able homes, accessible transportation and a myriad of vibrant programs designed to improve human connectedness in a central, community-based location. The social and medical services provided at this campus will be available to all of Marin's older adults; not just those who live onsite.

The recent report, "Older Adult Housing in Marin: Planning for 2030," estimates that approximately 7,000 older residents in Marin currently need affordable housing. Whistlestop is addressing this critical need by partnering with local non-profit Eden Housing to develop 67 housing units that are 100% affordable and exclusively for older residents. This affordable housing project will be the first of its kind in Marin County, and will feature community rooms, a computer center and library, and landscaped courtyards with gardens. The campus will also be San Rafael's first car-free community, as services and amenities will be walkable, and transportation will be provided by Whistlestop for its residents and members.

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There is growing recognition that non-medical services for older adults are as important for overall health as those received in a medical provider's office. Whistlestop is addressing these "social determinants of health" by partnering with local health care payers and providers in creating a "modern health hub" and integrated care clinic at our new campus. Providing wrap-around health care services will allow Whistlestop to more effectively address specific needs and will improve health outcomes for older adults in Marin County.

Social isolation is an epidemic sweeping our country. What many do not realize is that this is a medical epidemic. According to a study by researchers at the AARP Public Policy Institute and at Stanford and Har-

vard universities, the impacts of people living in social isolation add almost \$7 billion a year to the cost of Medicare, mostly because of longer hospital stays — a result, researchers hypothesize, of not having community support at home. Those who are isolated are at an increased risk of depression, cognitive decline and dementia, among other health conditions. The new Whistlestop campus will be a welcoming, central hub for residents and members where they can share meals, attend classes and engage in conversations and activities with contemporaries.

The Healthy Aging Campus will also contribute to community vitality by moving isolated older residents out of their homes and into a supportive environment and integrating older residents into the thriving

downtown San Rafael area. The project will contribute to the economic development, sustainability and vitality of downtown San Rafael.

At Whistlestop, we envision a connected community where older adults are celebrated and nurtured, and where all people have equitable access to whatever resources, connections and services they need in order to thrive. We call this "aging equity," and we believe that we all share in the responsibility to make this vision a reality.

The San Rafael Planning Commission will review the merits of this project at a public meeting on Tuesday at 7 p.m.

To learn more about Whistlestop's Healthy Aging Campus or to view a short film that captures Whistlestop's vision, visit HealthyAgingCampus.org.

Joe O'Hehir is CEO of Whistlestop, a San Rafael-based nonprofit that promotes the independence, well-being and quality of life for older adults and people living with disabilities in Marin County.